

Classical sculpture in Victorian Britain

Caroline Vout

In spring 2015 Tate Britain will stage an exhibition entitled 'Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837-1901' (24 February to 24 May). But what place did Classical Greek and Roman art have in this 'age of invention'? Caroline Vout investigates and encourages you to go and see.

If Victorian Britain is known for anything, it is known for industrialization. Steam-engines were the new sculptures, and sculptures were mass-produced by machine. Artists turned their talents to biblical paintings, stained glass and photography. Schools, universities and railway stations were suddenly not neo-classical in their design but neo-Gothic.

But where does this caricature of the period leave Greek and Roman art? Back in the eighteenth century, any elite European worth their salt spent their youth in Italy, greedily gobbling up the remains of Greek and Roman culture that they had learned about at school. Seeing was believing, but owning ancient sculpture more affirming still. Soon, town houses and country seats the length and breadth of Britain were crammed with the stuff, real and reproduction. Classical sculpture did more than celebrate its owner's education and good taste; it enabled him to speak an international language. Ever since the Renaissance, it has been by displaying investment in the Antique that court-societies have competed with one another for political power on an international stage.

It would be odd if the Classical lost its currency overnight – especially given the opportunities for wider dissemination that mass-print media, public museums, and international exhibitions brought with them, not to mention the rise in public sculpture that accompanied urbanization. These innovations inevitably challenged the established formula that equated Classical subject-matter and style with elite status; but they also gave Greek and Roman culture the chance to be more pointed (in relation to the Gothic, Japan, and the Orient), more politicized, more relevant. Even sculptors such as Hamo Thornycroft (born in London in 1850) who created male figures that deliberately eschewed the 'insipidities' of icons like the Apollo Belvedere (right) in favour of

a more 'modern', 'working man's' aesthetic, could not ignore the old currency but inevitably traded on and in it. And the population at large enjoyed Greek and Roman statuary in the cast courts at Crystal Palace. Not that this deterred the upper classes from continuing to indulge themselves: Queen Victoria and her husband Albert gave miniature versions of famous sculptures, the Apollo Belvedere included, to one other on their birthdays.

The flight and fall of Phaethon

Some of the most sought-after objects at the international exhibitions that dominated the Victorian period, enabling countries to showcase their scientific and technical ingenuity, were the bronze miniatures (made with innovative reducing machinery) and shell cameos. Many of these cameos, which were cheaper than their onyx counterparts, were decorated with figures familiar from galleries of ancient art up and down Europe, but others with figures from more recent sculptures by artists such as John Gibson (born in Wales in 1790). Gibson was one of the nineteenth-century sculptors whose work would later be condemned as 'insipid', but he was also the sculptor whose 'Tinted Venus' (first shown at the London International Exhibition of 1862) had caused a scandal, its painted lips, nipples, blond hair, blue eyes, and golden bangles making the goddess too fleshy for comfort. Books of his engravings, published in the 1850s and 1860s, ensured that his designs were widely influential.

Let's look at one of these shell cameos (below) in detail. Produced in about the middle of the nineteenth century and signed by Tommaso Saulini, whose studio was near to that of Gibson in Rome, the large, curved rectangular piece (probably meant to be set into an ornate hair-comb rather than be worn as a brooch) is deco-

rated with Gibson's version of Helios' son Phaethon blazing a trail across the sky in his father's chariot. Anyone who knows the myth also knows that Phaethon will lose control of the horses and be blasted to death by one of Zeus' thunderbolts. But for now, he holds the reins taut as he travels at speed, his biceps bulging and his cloak flying. Only the stars stop him being a charioteer in a Roman circus and elevate him heavenwards. He is beautiful, Apollosesque, and, as a risk-taker, very glamorous.

By 1872 Gibson's Phaethon was sufficiently famous to grace the cover of William Bell Scott's *The British School of Sculpture*, a book that attempted to account for the then reputation of contemporary British sculpture by studying the best practitioners of the recent past. These included the Scotsman Alexander Munro, a sculptor of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which, as its name suggests, took its inspiration not from the Classicism of Raphael and friends but from the art of a different Italy – late Mediaeval and early Renaissance. But still it is Gibson's 'Phaethon driving the chariot of the sun' that epitomizes British achievement. In contrast to the cameo, in this and other drawings, the boy's body is nude, accentuating his debt to the Classical.

This cameo, it turns out, miniaturizes two marble versions of the scene, one of them bought for £500 by one of the wealthiest men of the period, banker John Naylor, for Leighton Hall in Welshpool, and the other commissioned in 1846 by Charles William Wentworth Fitzwilliam for Wentworth Woodhouse in South Yorkshire. It is perhaps indicative of the fashion for the Gothic that the latter had originally asked Gibson for 'knights on horseback in armour'. But Gibson prevailed, and a few years later, after a terrible train journey through the English country-side, saw it and its companion-piece, 'The Hours [*Horai*] leading the horses of the sun', installed above opposing fireplaces in the main entertainment space, a vast room already adorned with reliefs by James 'Athenian' Stuart (1713–88) and with Classical statuary. Recently, the house has opened its doors to the public, allowing access to the pieces *in situ*.

To all intents and purposes, Wentworth's Marble Hall feels like an eighteenth-century space, begging comparison with the marble halls of Kedleston in Derbyshire and Holkham in Norfolk. More than this, Charles William's additions are in sympathy with the aims of the house's earlier owner, Charles Watson-Wentworth, the second Marquess of Rockingham, whose collection of ancient sculpture and commissioning of pieces by sculptor Joseph Nollekens (1737–1823), are legendary. But the world was changing: although Classics was still central to elite education, large-scale rail transport and the opportunities for tourism it brought with it were already dulling the attractions of the Grand Tour with its standard itineraries, while the rich rewards to be won in trade and industry created new millionaires also keen to invest in the arts. The Wentworth-Fitzwilliams themselves lined their coffers with income from factories and mines. After World War II, their own estate became an open-cast mining site, causing long-lasting damage to the stately home's fabric.

Soap manufacturer, William Hesketh Lever, is one of the most interesting of the men whose fortunes were made by trade and industry. His tastes ranged from Greek pottery and Roman funerary altars to tapestries and contemporary painting, often Classical in subject-matter, but ideally also female and nude. After the death of his wife in 1913, he decided to honour her by building a gallery so as to share his collection with the public. In 1922, the Lady Lever Gallery at Port Sunlight on the Wirral, a village itself built for Lever's employees, opened its doors. One can only imagine what his workforce made of it!

Classicism in context

The eighteenth century seems like a different world. But even then, wealthy men had displayed their love and learning of the Classical past in a myriad of different ways, some of these surprising. Take Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, commissioned by Sir Nathaniel Curzon in 1759. The neo-classical house, designed by Robert Adam, was one of the grandest in the land, but chose to populate the niches in its marble hall not with genuine antiquities bought from British artists acting as agents in Rome (as was the case with other English country houses), nor with contemporary sculpture, but with plaster casts of great works such as the Medici Venus. And in Twickenham on the banks of the Thames at the same time, Horace Walpole, the son of Britain's first Prime Minister, was making his mark on the landscape by building Strawberry Hill House, an unapologetically Gothic structure and a tourist attraction in his own life-

time. Not that he wasn't keen on Greco-Roman sculpture, especially if it had passed through a famous Italian collection. (Indeed he is captured by portrait painter Joshua Reynolds admiring an engraving of a marble eagle which had been recently discovered close to the Baths of Caracalla in Rome to be given pride of place in his house's main gallery.) But the Gothic was already his way of standing out in a crowd, giving him a unique container for his Classicism.

This sense of experimentation and conversation continues in the Victorian period. It is true that Classical sculpture's pale, familiar forms were often seen as the antithesis of modernity. And it is also true that the ease with which statues were now reproduced was sometimes seen as debasing sculpture as an artistic medium. But the allure of Classical sculpture did not fade completely, as Gibson, Saulini, Lever, and others realized to their advantage. In this sense, the situation was not that far removed from the eighteenth century when Classicism was already more complicated than we sometimes think, jostling for supremacy with the fascination in Japanese, Polynesian, and Indian – as well as Gothic – culture, not to mention with the scientific method. Even before the Enlightenment, back in the sixteenth century, collectors were as interested in shells, fossils, and holy relics as they were in gems and sculpture. From the writings of Pliny the Elder in the middle of the first century A.D. onwards, the desire for Classical art was part of a broader intellectual agenda – to understand one's place in the world by ordering knowledge.

It was also, always, about the appreciation of form and content. Fast-forward to 2011, and an ancient statue-group, brought back from Rome in the eighteenth century and found languishing in the gardens of Aske Hall in North Yorkshire fetches £12.2 million at auction. Even, if not especially, mechanical and digital ages, have a pressing need for beauty.

Caroline Vout teaches Classical Art and literature at the University of Cambridge. She has written several catalogue-entries for the 'Sculpture Victorious' exhibition which goes on show first at Yale University this autumn. Leighton's 'Athlete', Saulini's 'Phaeton', and casts of the two Wentworth Woodhouse reliefs, all feature in the show.

Wentworth Woodhouse, near Rotherham has recently opened its doors to the public. For more details, including visiting times, see www.wentworthwoodhouse.co.uk